Colorful murals transform cafe

Murals in tradition of Mexican folk art

By MIKE WALLACE

The murals painted on three sides of the Mona Lisa Cafe on Rodriguez St. are rooted in a long tradition of Mexican folk art.

"Mural painting has come from the Mexican tradition of art as something for the people in the community — something for them to relate to," said Vicki Petrovich of Santa Cruz, who worked on two of the walls.

"The idea is that it takes art out of the museum and shares it with the community."

Carmen Leon, who worked on one of the Mona Lisa murals, and also on the mural at Radcliff School, called the murals, "an attempt to tie in our past with our future, to tie in with where we are now."

The painting of the Mona Lisa began about a year and a half ago as the idea of the late Alex Espinoza. Espinoza had grown up in the barrio of East Los Angeles, but had left it to attend UCSC.

La Academia del Arte, a locally-based organization formed to promote the arts among minority groups had given Espinoza a grant to draw a mural, and he was looking for a place to do it. He approached Mario and Sergio Carabarin, owner-proprietors of the Mona Lisa, a small family cafe.

"He was trying to get into this area, get it fixed up," said Mario Carabarin. "Alex called this part of town 'the body of Watsonville.'"

The Carabarins gave Espinoza the go-ahead to paint a mural on one side of the restaurant, the side facing Riverside Drive.

Espinoza painted the first mural — with a pre-Columbian theme depicting an Indian tribal rite — by himself.

Shortly after it went up, the mural came under scrutiny by the city, which felt that it might be in violation of the municipal sign ordinance. The matter was submitted to city attorney Don Haile, who finally ruled that it was not.

Last summer, Espinoza and Miss Petrovich painted the smaller mural that adorns the front of the restaurant. Espinoza also had a grant from the California Arts Council for another mural. He originally tried to get permission to paint the side of the building rented by La Coalicion, but could not. So he again cast his eyes toward the Mona Lisa.

The third and final painting began taking shape last October. Espinoza, Vicki Petrovich and Carmen Leon all took part in designing it, and each was responsible for painting a third of the final mural.

This mural, which faces Front St., is more contemporary in theme and subject matter than the first, drawing heavily on elements and slogans of modern Chicano life.

From inception to completion, the project took five months, including three weeks spent simply scraping off the old paint on the exterior wall of the cafe.

The project was completed in late March, and on March 31 — the day of its dedication — Alex Espinoza was stricken with a cerebral hemorrhage while in a classroom at UCSC's Oakes College. He died en route to the hospital, at the age of 28.